



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 10 December 2019

by H Porter BA(Hons) MScDip IHBC

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 18 December 2019

Appeal Ref: APP/W3330/W/19/3236323

Land west of Embercombe House, Comb Close, Bicknoller, Somerset TA4 4EP

- The appeal is made under section 78 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 against a refusal to grant outline planning permission.
 - The appeal is made by Sally Ann Heller against the decision of Somerset West and Taunton.
 - The application Ref 3/01/19/001, dated 10 March 2019, was refused by notice dated 18 June 2019.
 - The development proposed is outline application for residential development for four number dwellings all details reserved other than access.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Procedural matters

2. The application was submitted in outline, with all matters except for access reserved for future consideration.

Main Issues

3. The main issues in this appeal are:
 - whether the appeal site offers a suitable location for the proposed development, having regard to whether there would be safe and easy pedestrian access to services and facilities; and the Council's settlement strategy policies;
 - the effect of the proposed development on the character and appearance of the area, including its effect on the Quantock Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

Reasons

Location

4. The appeal concerns a part of field laid to rough pasture land situated at the edge of the village of Bicknoller. Policy SC1 of the West Somerset Local Plan to 2032, November 2016 (the LP), defines Bicknoller as a 'primary village', where limited housing development within 50 metres of the built-up area of the village can be acceptable subject to it being, amongst other things, well-related to existing essential services and social facilities within the settlement, to which there would be safe and easy pedestrian access.

5. Bicknoller is a relatively small village in a rural location that offers some basic local services such as village hall and community shop, church, and a public house. While they are not particularly far from the appeal site, the routes to these services and social facilities are extremely narrow in parts, lack footways or street lighting, and are bounded by high hedges or boundary walls.
6. Moreover, the limited range of the services and facilities that Bicknoller offers would conceivably necessitate regular access to essential services and facilities further afield. A bus route runs along the A358, ostensibly providing a regular service to larger settlements including Taunton, Minehead and Williton. However, the closest bus stops to the appeal site would involve walking or cycling along the narrow, unlit and winding Dashwoods Lane.
7. Although the intervening distances between the appeal site and the services and facilities in Bicknoller, or to the A358 bus stops, are not long, the nature of the routes involved would be a disincentive to journeying along them on foot, especially during darker winter months or in inclement weather. That there have been no recorded incidents does not attest to a safe highway network for pedestrians or indicate new development should be permitted. Indeed, the specific characteristics of Dashwoods Lane and routes towards the village from the appeal site suggest that pedestrian access from the appeal site to essential services and community facilities in Bicknoller would be neither safe nor easy.
8. The location of the appeal site would consequently limit opportunities to regularly access services and facilities by sustainable transport modes. Rather, the majority of journeys to, for example, schools, supermarkets and employment, would be taken by private car trips. Therefore, the appeal site does not offer a suitable location for the proposed development, having regard to whether there would be safe and easy pedestrian access to services and facilities. Conflict therefore arises with Policies SD1, SC1 and TR2 of the LP and the National Planning Policy Framework, Revised February 2019 (the Framework) that, amongst other things, seek to ensure development is sustainable, and fosters a safe built environment, with accessible services, and is located to maximise the attractiveness of modes of transport other than by the private car.

Character and appearance

9. Bicknoller is a small village situated in rural surroundings within the Quantock Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Currently, the sporadic nature of development along with the greenery and openness at the outer edges of Bicknoller are important transitional areas between the settlement and the more rural AONB context beyond.
10. The appeal concerns a portion of a large paddock located at the southwestern edge of Bicknoller. On the approach to the village along Dashwoods Lane, the appeal site provides a link with the wider verdant landscape and extends this right up to the developed edge of the village. Similarly, on leaving the village by the same route, the soft, green and informal characteristics of the appeal site alleviate the transition between the more regular concentration of built form in Bicknoller and the countryside surroundings. Therefore, it is the characteristically open, green and undeveloped nature of the appeal site that is of value to both the character and appearance of the area and the AONB landscape.

11. The illustrative block plan shows the proposal would introduce four detached dwellings and associated garaging onto the northernmost corner of the appeal site. The dwellings would be arranged around a shared access driveway off Combe Close. Notwithstanding the reserved matters, the proposed development would consolidate built development along Combe Close up to Dashwoods Lane and fundamentally weaken the green outer edge of the village. Irrespective of the quality of the detailed design or landscaping at reserved matters stage, or that no existing hedgerows or mature trees would be affected, the imposition of four dwellings onto the site would have a harmful urbanising impact. Exacerbated by hard-landscaped areas and inevitable plot-subdivisions, the proposal would stand out as a domestic intrusion, which would erode the soft, informal qualities of the existing field and the verdant, spacious landscape setting it provides at the village edge.
12. Ultimately, the location of the appeal site in the open countryside and AONB sets a high bar where new development is strictly controlled by local and national planning policies. I cannot agree that the impacts of new development can be lessened by good design or mitigated. On this basis, the proposed development would cause harm to the character and appearance of the area. Moreover, although relatively localised in its extent, there would also be small residual harm to the landscape and scenic beauty of the AONB. Conflict therefore arises with LP Policies SC1 and HN14 insofar as they seek to ensure proposals conserve or enhance the natural beauty of the AONB, and complement the character of the existing settlement. There would also be conflict with the Framework policies that afford great weight to conserving landscape and scenic beauty in AONBs.

Other matters

13. In support of the appeal, my attention has been drawn to a recently approved development in the neighbouring village of West Quantoxhead. That site may well be similarly located within 50 metres of the built-up area of a primary village in the AONB and comparatively further from essential services and facilities or bus stops. Whilst I do not know the specific planning considerations that lead to that approval being granted, the location plan provided shows that site to be more of a gap in an otherwise regular concentration of houses, where the lane is wider and where front driveways would offer pedestrians refuge. The site-specific circumstances are therefore not usefully comparable and do not justify allowing the harmful development in this case, which has been decided on its own merits.

Conclusion

14. I do not find there to be any material considerations sufficient to outweigh the conflict with the development plan and Framework taken as a whole. For the reasons given above, I therefore conclude that the appeal should be dismissed.

H Porter

INSPECTOR